

Dear Ms. Bruce, Mr. Jillette, Mr. Corn-Revere, Mr. Collins, Mr. Skover, Mr. Dworman, Mr. Balaker, and Mrs. Balaker,

As an Undergraduate Departmental Representative of the Theater Arts Department at Brandeis University, I wanted to take a moment today to respond to your poorly-informed allegations against Brandeis University's cancellation of Michael Weller's *Buyer Beware*. I want to begin by expressing an understanding of your misunderstanding. After being attacked and pulled apart by right-leaning news sources, I believe the University's administration has demonstrated outrageous levels of incompetence in attempting to scramble to cover up any mistakes and to keep all parties moderately appeased.

The first fact which your article ignores is that the piece was neither cancelled due to its use of Lenny Bruce's language nor due to its references to Lenny Bruce at all. I wish to explain more fully why I, a student who has been incredibly vocal about opposing the performance of the play on campus in 2017, have sought for its cancellation. Unfortunately, I have been writing all too many letters this week and instead of rehashing anything have chosen to attach below an open letter to the Dramatist's Guild explaining my reasoning.

A second point you fail to weigh is that, two semesters ago, when Lenny Bruce's papers first came into our archives, the Theater Arts Department developed a comedy show with students which openly engaged with his work and his legacy. The show, featuring six undergraduate students, a professional Boston comedian, and produced by a Theater Arts faculty member, was able to generate productive dialogue about free speech on campus. One of my most profound take-aways from the production was how profoundly we are affected by Bruce's work across all forms of media today. We can acknowledge that he lived in a very different time than the one we live in now and that perhaps his tactics and his battles would have been different had he been alive in 2017, but we cannot diminish his importance. A third falsity in your letter falls (through no fault of your own) in claiming that the leaders of some sort of student rebellion did not read the play. This is based on a quote which has been circulated, but is inaccurate. Ayelet Schrek is a recent alum of the University who lives in California. While she has been incredibly outspoken in her opposition to the material in the play, her opinions are simply based on what

she has heard as she lives across the nation and would have no way of obtaining the script. She is not, nor has she ever claimed to be leading any sort of rebellion. In fact, the ‘campaign’ and ‘protest’ that I have had the pleasure of reading about from all manner of conservative news sources, has been nothing more than civil conversation and exchanges regarding the most important ways the Theater Arts Department can allocate resources at a time when our nation is in such turmoil. Finally, a fourth frequently-spread lie surrounding this controversy falls when you publish Michael Weller’s claim that he was not aware that anyone at Brandeis was disturbed by the perspective with which he chose to present our students of color. While I understand that the faculty at the school refused to speak with him for a while, I am more than happy to share with you (at your request) my own email correspondence with Weller regarding my first impressions of the script. I hope you will take the time to read my letter below as I feel it may answer some of your questions. It is my intention that FIRE be able to release a new statement which better reflects the truth of Brandeis University’s situation. Please do not hesitate to reach out to me as I am happy to further clarify as best I can and am always open to discourse. I would be more than happy to eat my hat if someone could actively and consciously convince me that I have engaged in anything resembling censorship. As a provocative artist myself, that is not something I would ever intend to do.

With respect, gratitude, and admiration for the vital work you do,

**Andrew Child**

**Undergraduate Departmental Representative, Theater Arts**

I find The Dramatist Guild's denunciation of Brandeis University’s decision not to produce Michael Weller’s Buyer Beware insidious and deeply disappointing. Your claim that the work is controversial, therefore inherently educational fails to note that, in order to be considered controversial, a work must be able to incite, on some scale, a public disagreement. At a time when popular news sources and politicians of every persuasion aim to malign students of color voicing dissent against the structures that systematically exclude them, I struggle to understand why ‘freedom of speech’ must be tolerated and even elevated before we consider the safety and

well-being of individuals who belong to marginalized communities. It is a privilege to be able to disassociate and critically approach a play that chooses to utilize students of color as an antagonizing force, and it is a privilege that not everyone on Brandeis' campus can afford in 2017. There is a conundrum when we begin talking about tolerating intolerance. While everyone is entitled to their freedom of expression, we as artists must choose what perspectives need to be elevated in specific moments.

In openly opposing the production of *Buyer Beware* on Brandeis' campus, colleagues and I have incessantly faced comparisons to dictators, censors, and book-burners throughout history. I warrant a guess that there is not a single individual on Brandeis' campus who was not inherently affected by our most recent presidential election. We all heard the discourse. We all see the news about acts of violence incited because of prejudice and racism every day. In silencing this particular work's presentation on our campus, we are not refusing to engage with troubling perspectives or prohibiting others from learning about them. We are merely refusing to further disseminate the idea that, in demanding justice and equality, people from marginalized communities pose some sort of threat to our nation's state of well-being. Your claim that "it is a university's duty to expose its students to a range of views that challenge and discomfort them" ignores the fact that, in attending a predominantly white, private university in the United States, there are individuals who experience discomfort derivative of their identities every day of their lives.

Weller's play is written from a perspective of fear and confusion. It is clear that, as a playwright, he does not understand what Black Lives Matter stands for, and therefore, feels threatened by it to a point where he feels the need to write about a black character who dreams of owning white slaves. Unfortunately, this fear resonates with a majority of white Americans and it manifests itself in ugly, dangerous ways. We cannot further spread these ideas as they are literally putting individual lives in danger.

In the end of your objection, you call for the University to "present guidelines, to Mr. Weller and to all other playwrights, as to what viewpoints are permitted to be expressed in a dramatic work produced at Brandeis University". As a student, I

would be thrilled to share with you my personal proposed guidelines for presenting a play at Brandeis or in any theatrical context:

1. A controversial play may only be presented from a seat of consciousness. Artists and voluntary individuals representing potentially victimized groups should be consulted and engaged in every step of the artistic process to ensure accuracy and inclusivity.
2. The entire artistic staff of the production must be prepared to engage with audience dissent in a way that is culturally competent and productive and be open to accepting the complexities and nuances surrounding issues addressed within the play.
3. In an educational context, no play may be presented which seeks to actively exclude or invalidate the perspectives and experiences of any group within the student body.
4. No play presented in an educational setting may actively seek to harm any member of the student body.

In recent seasons, plays by Marius von Mayenburg, Deborah Zoe Lauffer, Lynn Nottage, Maria Irene Fornes, and Charles Mee have successfully initiated productive conversation about inclusivity and representation in the theatre. I resent the idea suggested in your published objection that we, as a department and as an educational institution, refuse to engage with works that challenge us, make us uncomfortable, and incite discourse that expands our world views. Whenever we talk about censorship, we must discuss complicated constructions of power. As an official, organized guild criticizing the actions and opinions of students within a university, you sit in a place of power. You have chosen to use that power to align with the side of America's majority in this instance. Brandeis University's Department of Theater Arts has chosen to challenge a common structure within the theater, and therefore stands with a moral minority. I can attest to with certainty that the discourse surrounding the presentation of Weller's play would not be nearly as productive as the discourse surrounding the cancellation of the play at the pressure of the student body.